



WHISPERING SMITH

By Frank H. Spearman

Illustrations by Andre Bowles

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Continued from last Sunday.

CHAPTER XIII.

The Shot in the Pass.

Dickie walked hurriedly through the dining room and out upon the rear porch. Her horse was standing where she had left him. Her heart beat furiously as she caught up the reins, but she sprang into the saddle and rode rapidly away. The flood of her temper had brought a disregard of consequences; it was in the glow of her eyes, the lines of her lips and the tremor of her nostrils as she breathed long and deeply on her flying horse.

When she checked Jim she had ridden miles, but not without a course nor without a purpose. Where the roads ahead of her parted to lead down the river and over the Elbow Pass to Medicine Bend, she halted within a clump of trees almost where she had first seen McCloud. Beyond the Mission mountains the sun was setting in a fire like that which glowed under her eyes. She could have counted her heartbeats as the crimson ball sank below the verge of the horizon and the shadows threw up the silver thread of the big river and deepened across the heavy green of the alfalfa fields. Where Dickie sat, struggling with her bounding pulse and holding Jim tightly in, no one from the ranch or, indeed, from the upcountry, could pass her unseen. She was waiting for a horseman and the sun had set but a few minutes when she heard a sharp gallop coming down the upper road from the hills.

All her brave plans, terror-stricken at the sound of the hoofbeats, fled from her utterly. She was stunned by the suddenness of the crisis. She had meant to stop McCloud and speak to him, but before she could summon her courage a tall, slender man on horseback dashed past within a few feet of her. She could almost have touched him as he flew by, and a horse less steady than Jim would have shied under her. Dickie caught her breath. She did not know this man—she had seen only his eyes, oddly bright in the twilight as he passed—but he was not of the ranch. He must have come from the hill road, she concluded, down which she herself had just ridden. He was somewhere from the north, for he sat his horse like a statue and rode like the wind.

But the encounter nerved her to her resolve. Some leaden moments passed, and McCloud, galloping at a far mid-distance toward the fork of the roads, checked his speed as he approached. He saw a woman on horseback waiting in his path.

"Mr. McCloud!"
"Miss Dunning!"
"I could not forgive myself if I waited too long to warn you that threats have been made against your life. Not of the kind you heard today. My cousin is not a murderer, and never could be. I am sure, in spite of his talk, but I was frightened at the thought that if anything dreadful should happen his name would be brought into it. There are enemies of yours in this country to be feared, and it is against these that I warn you. Good-night!"

"Surely you won't ride away without giving me a chance to thank you!" exclaimed McCloud. Dickie checked her horse. "I owe you a double debt of gratitude," he added, "and I am anxious to assure you that we desire nothing that will injure your interests in any way in crossing your lands."

"I know nothing about those matters, because my cousin manages everything. It is growing late and you have a good way to go, so good-night."

"But you will allow me to ride back to the house with you?"

"Oh, no, indeed, thank you!"

"It will soon be dark and you are alone."

"No, no! I am quite safe and I have only a short ride. It is you who have far to go," and she spoke again to Jim, who started bridle-rein.

"Miss Dunning, won't you listen just a moment? Please don't run away!" McCloud was trying to come up with her. "Won't you hear me a moment? I have suffered some little humiliation today; I should really rather be shot up than have more put on me. I am a man and you are a woman, and it is already dark. Isn't it for me to see you safely to the house? Won't you at least pretend I can act as an escort and let me go with you? I should make a poor figure trying to catch you on horseback!"

Dickie nodded naively. "With that horse."

"With any horse—I know that," said McCloud, keeping at her side.

"But I can't let you ride back with me," declared Dickie, urging Jim and looking directly at McCloud for the first time. "How could I explain?"

"Let me explain. I am famous for explaining," urged McCloud, spurring, too.

"And will you tell me what I should be doing while you were explaining?" she asked.

"Perhaps getting ready a first aid for the injured."

"I feel as if I ought to run away," declared Dickie, since she had clearly decided not to. "It will have to be a compromise, I suppose. You must not ride farther than the first gate, and let us take this trail instead of the road. Now make your horse go as fast as you can and I'll keep up."

But McCloud's horse, though not a wonder, went far too fast to suit his rider, who divided his efforts between checking him and keeping up the conversation. When McCloud dismounted to open Dickie's gate, and stood in the twilight with his hat in his hand and his bridle over his arm, he was telling a story about Marion Sinclair, and Dickie in the saddle, tapping her knee with her bridle-rein, was looking down and past him as if the light upon his face were too bright. Before she would start away she made him remount, and he said goodby only after half a promise from her that she would show him sometime a trail to the top of Bridge's peak, with a view of the Peace river on the east and the whole Mission range and the park country on the north. The sun had set away at an amazing run, nodding back as he sat still holding his hat above his head.

McCloud galloped toward the pass with one determination—that he would have a horse, and a good one, one that could travel with Jim, if it cost him his salary. He exulted as he rode, for the day had brought him everything

he wished, and humiliation had been swallowed up in triumph. It was nearly dark when he reached the crest between the hills. At this point the southern grade of the pass winds sharply, whence its name, the Elbow; shade the head of the pass, the grade may be commanded at intervals for half a mile. Trotting down this road with his head in a whirl of excitement, McCloud heard the crack of a rifle at the same instant he felt a sharp slap at his hat. Instinctively on all brave men very much alike.



McCloud laid his head low and spurred his horse.

McCloud dropped forward in his saddle, and, seeking no explanation, laid his head low and spurred his horse. The horse, quite amazed, bolted and served down the grade like a snipe, with his rider crouching close for a second shot. But no second shot came, and after another mile McCloud ventured to take off his hat and put his finger through the holes in it, though he did not stop his horse to make the examination. When they reached the open country the horse had settled into a fast, long stride that not only redeemed his reputation but relieved his rider's nerves.

When McCloud entered his office it was half past nine o'clock, and the first thing he did before turning on the lights was to draw the window-shades. He examined the hat again, with sensations that were new to him—fear, resentment, and a hearty hatred of his enemies. But all the while the picture of Dickie remained. He thought of her nodding to him as they parted in the saddle, and her picture blotted out all that had followed.

CHAPTER XIV.

At the Wickup.

Two nights later Whispering Smith rode into Medicine Bend. "I've been around Williams' Cache," he said, answering McCloud's greeting as he had come from a late supper.

When he asked for news McCloud told him the story of the trouble with his cousin, and the survey, and added that he had referred the matter to Glover. He told then of his unpleasant surprise when riding home afterward.

"Yes," assented Smith, looking with feverish interest at McCloud's head; "I heard about it."

"That's odd, for I haven't said a word about the matter to anybody but Marion Sinclair, and you haven't seen her."

"I heard up the country. It is great luck that he missed me."

"Who missed me?"

"The bullet went through my hat."

"Let me see the hat."

McCloud produced it. It was a heavy, broad brimmed Stetson, with a bullet hole at the crown, through the front and the back of the crown. Smith made McCloud put the hat on and describe his position when the shot was fired. McCloud stood up, and Whispering Smith eyed him and put questions.

"What do you think of it?" asked McCloud when he had done.

Smith leaned forward on the table and pushed McCloud's hat toward him as if the incident were closed. "There is no question in my mind, and there never has been, but that Stetson puts up the best hat worn on the range."

Smith raised his eyebrows. "Why thank you. Your conclusion clears things so. After you speak a man has nothing to do but guess."

"But, by heaven, George," exclaimed Smith, speaking with unaccustomed fervor, "Miss Dickie Dunning is a hummer, isn't she? That child will have the whole range going in another year. To think of her standing up and lashing her cousin in that way when he was browbeating a railroad man!"

"Where did you hear about that?"

"The whole Crawling Stone country is talking about it. You never told me you had a misunderstanding with Dickie Dunning at Marion's. Loosen up!"

"I will loosen up in the way you do. What scared me most, Gordon, was waiting for a second shot. Why didn't he fire again?"

"Doubtless he thought he had you the first time. Any man big enough to start after you is not used to shooting twice at 250 yards. He probably thought you were falling out of the saddle; and it was dark. I can account for everything but your reaching the pass so late. How did you spend all your time between the ranch and the foothills?"

McCloud saw there was no escape from telling of his meeting with Dickie Dunning, of her warning, and of his ride to the gate with her. Every point brought suppressed exclamations from Whispering Smith. "So she gave you your life," he mused. "Good for her! If you had got into the pass on time you could have got away—the cards were stacked for you. He overestimated you a little, George; just a little. Good men make mistakes. The sport of circumstances that we are! The sport of circumstances!"

"Now tell me how you heard so much about it, Gordon, and where?"

"Through a friend, but forget it."

"Do you know who shot at me?"

"Yes."

"I think I do, too. I think it was the fellow who shot so well at the rifle at the barbecue—what was his name? He was working for Sinclair, and perhaps is yet."

"You mean Seagrue, the Montana cowboy? No, you are wrong. Seagrue is a man killer, but a square one."

"How do you know?"

"I will tell you sometime—but this was not Seagrue."

"One of Dunning's men, was it? Stormy Gorman?"

"No, no, a very different sort! Stormy is a windbag. The man that is after you is in town this minute, and he has come to stay until he finishes his job."

"The devil! That's what makes your eyes so bright, is it? Do you know him?"

"I have seen him. You may see him yourself if you want to."

"I'd like nothing better. When?"

"Tonight—in thirty minutes." McCloud closed his desk. There was a rap at the door.

"That must be Kennedy," said Smith. "I haven't seen him, but I sent him word to meet me here." The door opened, and Kennedy entered the room.

"Sit down," said Smith, said Whispering Smith, easily. "Ye gates."

"How's that?"

"Wie geht es? Don't pretend you can't make out a German. He is trying to let on he is a Dutchman."

Whispering Smith looked at McCloud. "You wouldn't believe it, but I can remember when Farrell wore wooden shoes and lighted his pipe with a candle. He sleeps under a feather bed yet. Du Sang is in town, Farrell."

"Du Sang!" echoed the tall man with mild interest as he picked up a ruler and, throwing his leg on the edge of the table, looked cheerful. "How long has Du Sang been in town? Visiting friends or doing business?"

"He is after your superintendent. He has been here since four o'clock, I reckon, and he ridden a hard road today to get in in time to talk it over with him. Want to go?"

Kennedy slapped his leg with the ruler. "I always want to go, don't I?"

"Farrell, if you hadn't been a railroad man you would have made a great undertaker, do you know that?" Kennedy slapped his leg, showed his ivory teeth. "You have such an instinct for funerals," added Whispering Smith.

"Now, Mr. Smith! Well, no, we are waiting for I'm ready," said Kennedy, taking his revolver and examining it.

McCloud put on his new hat and asked if he should take a gun. "You are really accompanying me as my guest, George," explained Whispering Smith, reproachfully. "Won't it be fun to shove this man right under Du Sang's nose and make him bat his eyes?"

"He is in your pocket if you like, George, provided you have one that will go off when sufficiently urged."

McCloud opened the drawer of the table and took from it a revolver. Whispering Smith reached out his hand for the gun, examined it, and handed it back.

"You don't like it?"

Smith smiled a sickly approbation. "A forty-five gun with a thirty-eight bore, George? A little light for shock; a little light. A bullet is intended to knock a man down; not necessarily to kill him, but, if possible, to keep him from killing you. Never mind, we all have our fads. Come on!"

At the foot of the stairs Whispering Smith stopped. "Now I don't know where he is, but he is in town, and we try the Three Horses." As they started down the street McCloud took the inside of the sidewalk, but Smith dropped behind and brought McCloud through the middle of the street.

Du Sang at the Three Horses, and leaving started to round up the street. They visited many places, but each was entered the same way. Kennedy maintained the right hand, and moved slowly ahead. He was to step aside only in case he saw Du Sang. McCloud in every instance followed him, with Whispering Smith just behind.

Whispering Smith's right hand, and without looking at Du Sang he passed the wrapper again over the tip of his tongue and slowly across his lips.

Du Sang looked sharply at him, and Smith looked at his cigar. Others were playing around the semi-circular table—it might mean nothing. Du Sang waited. Smith lifted his right hand from the table and felt in his handcoat for a match. Du Sang, however, made no effort to take up the dice. He watched Whispering Smith scratch a match on the table, and, because it failed to light, through the dice, it was scratched the second on the table, marking a cross between the dice.

The meanest negro in the joint would not have stood that, yet Du Sang hesitated. Whispering Smith, mildly, looked up. "Hello, Pearlina! You shooting here?" He pushed the dice back toward the outlaw. "Shoot again!"

Du Sang, scowling, snapped the dice and threw badly.

Whispering Smith saw that he would not draw. He taunted him again in low tones, and, backing away, spoke laughingly to McCloud. While Kennedy covered the corner, Smith backed to the door and waited for the two to join him. They halted a moment at the door, then they backed slowly up the steps and out into the street.

There was no talk till they reached the Wickup office. "Now, will some of you tell me who Du Sang is?" asked McCloud, after Kennedy and Whispering Smith, with banter and laughing had gone over the scene.

Kennedy picked up the ruler. "The wickedest, cruelest man in the bunch—and the best shot."

"Where is your hat, George—the one he put the bullet through?" asked Whispering Smith, limp in the big chair. "Burn it up; he thinks he missed you. Burn it up now. Never let him find out what a close call you had. Du Sang? Yes, he is coal-blooded as a wild cat and cruel as a soft bullet. Du Sang would shoot a dying man, George, just to keep him squirming in the dirt. Did you ever see such eyes in a human being, set like that and blinking so in the light? It's bad enough to watch a man when you can see his eyes. Here's hoping we're done with him!"

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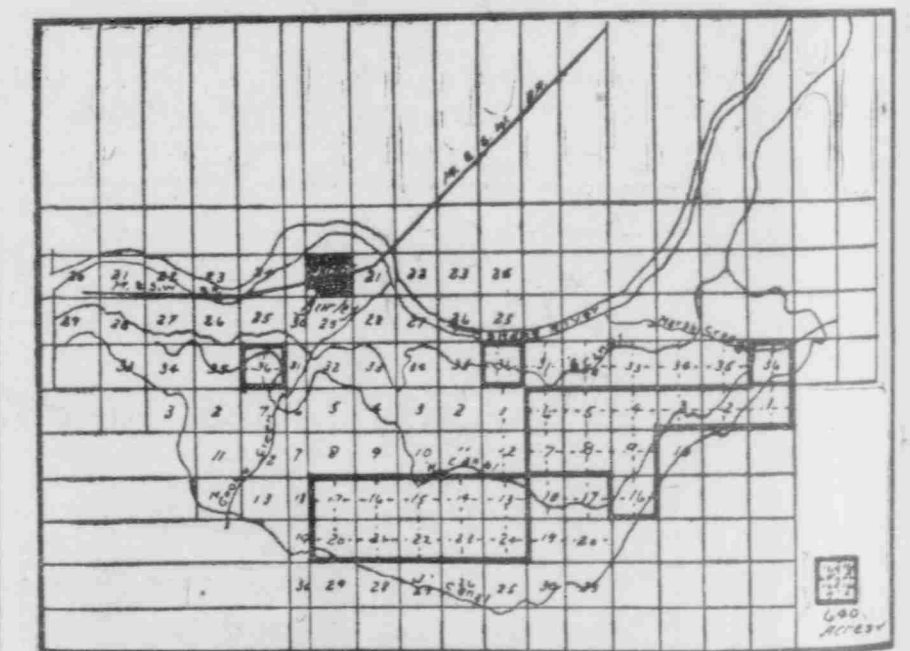
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